Another time, Macleod!

I know it's predictable, I'm still gonna do it. I'm going to recite the infamous line. Don't stop me now, I'm having such a good time, I'm having a ball! That's not it, I'm just psyching myself up. All in good *time*. Time! Let that anvil echo around your cranium for a moment.

There can be only one! One memorable line and one *game*. Up until 1995 anyway, the year in which Lore Design's Alone in the Dark clone for the Atari Jaguar (based on the spin-off animated TV series) was released. Before then Ocean wore this dubious crown of singularity courtesy of their 1986 one-on-one slash 'em up, known simply as 'Highlander'. At this point, the movie was intended to stand alone, appropriately enough as a self-contained romantic adventure with a finite story arc. Then all the subtitled movie sequels followed with their ridiculous, continuity-abusing plots and diminishing budgets.

Highlander: Mills & Boon with a dash of decapitation

Perhaps it's for the best that the proposed Windows/PS3/Xbox 360 RPG 'Highlander: The Game' Square Enix intended to deliver was axed in December 2010. Who's *Owen* MacLeod anyway?

Highlander for the Amstrad, Speccy and C64 is notorious in the 8-bit community for being the mother of all stinkers in that it barely makes an effort to reflect the movie, and controls like an inebriated elephant immersed in Swarfega (games and Scottish peasants were very grubby back then, this was the dark ages).

> "No prizes here. Ocean probably paid big bucks for the license and has ended up with a golden turkey."

Sinclair User (40%, January 1987)

Highlander, unfortunately, is also notable for being co-produced by three developers who died prematurely under tragic circumstances. Ian Weatherburn through suicide in March 1989, Steve Cain owing to the lung cancer that finally prevailed in July 2006, and Steve Calvert who was murdered in 2007.

Although not directly related, that the game is overshadowed by the series of horrible events that led to their death is no great loss.

Martin's brother Steve Calvert composed the Amstrad version's music, hence not being included in the roster here.

In Ocean's defence, they can at least distance themselves from the project somewhat given that it was outsourced to a third-party. Canvas Software - who produced all three Highlander variants - created as many critically acclaimed games as awful ones so it wasn't necessarily a terrible decision to entrust this adaptation to them. It wasn't predestined to fail. Simon Butler who worked on Highlander's background and sprite art across all three 8-bit platforms wouldn't necessarily agree...

"Some of the worst Ocean games ever were done by an external software house I worked for before my first stint

at Ocean. They were called Canvas... and they were set up by ex-Imagine guys Steve Cain and Ian Weatherburn.

Steve had the common sense to step back almost immediately after helping set it up due to Ian's overwhelming desire to be a tin-pot dictator. He's not totally responsible for his manners or lack of them... he was ruined by having worked for Imagine first and they ingrained his already abrasive personality with an unbearable ego and a complete lack of concern for other people's feelings.

Ian then recruited industry fat-bastard Roy Gibson... another Imagine retard and together they wormed their way into David Ward and Jon Wood's good books, but almost immediately after that they proceeded to churn out complete dross like Highlander and It's a Knockout and Legend of Kage. Titles that actually sully the good name of sh**e."

Simon Butler, comments posted to the Ocean reunion forum on 5th February 2005 in a thread entitled 'The Worst Ocean Game You've Ever Played'

Today cult 'classic' Highlander (nee Black Knight/Shadow Clan), partially inspired by 1977 movie, The Duellists, needs little introduction. At the time of release, it was a different matter entirely - costing $19m to produce, returning a paltry worldwide box office gross of only $12.9m placed the fantasy action-adventure firmly in the catastrophe category.

It was a shame since the premise showed much potential, and a minor role from Sean Connery would have generated plenty of excitement amongst his James Bond fan base. Frame Highlander in such a way as to avoid focusing on

Sean's minimal involvement and the trailer alone should have thrust cinema attendance figures through the roof.

In theory thoroughly Blockbuster-compatible, the principle plot can be broken down to:

- Immortals exist for unexplained reasons. As the name suggests, they live forever... until a rival (or nasty accident) lops off their head. Oh well, Who Wants to Live Forever anyway?

If you're an immortal and are killed by an unsuspecting mortal you'd be wise to make your recovery when they're not looking. It must get so wearisome trying to explain this X-File every time!

- Some immortals are good guys, some aren't, while none are aware that they're special until 'killed' in ways that don't involve decapitation. You don't have to be *born* into a family of immortals, you just *are* one. Because the script says so.

- When one immortal dispatches another they absorb their supreme power in a Castle of Greyskull kind of way. This process is known as 'The Quickening'. A baby's first sign of life in the womb is described by the same term, while the experience itself was guided by the religious ideals of sublimity. *Shrug* It's a Kind of Magic.

  Connor MacLeod: I have the power! Aye, the Quickening that empowers me! I feel everything! I know... I know everything! I am everything!

- One immortal in particular - The Kurgen - is downright loathsome and villainous, and intends to use his superpowers to conquer the world, sending mankind spiralling into the depths of despair. He has no real motivation for doing so other than evil being necessary to bring balance to the yin-yang.

  Kurgan: (to a pair of nuns passing by him) Happy Hallowe'en, ladies!

  Kurgan: Nuns. No sense of humour.

  Connor MacLeod: Ramirez's blade did not cut deeply enough. He was right about you. You're slime.

  Kurgan: Ramirez was an effete snob! He died on his knees. I took his head and raped his woman before his blood was even cold.

  (MacLeod looks at him in fury)

  Kurgan: Ah, I see. Ramirez lied. She was not his woman. She was *your* woman. And she never told you. I wonder why. Perhaps I gave her something you never could, and secretly she yearned for my return.

Kurgan: (MacLeod attempts to throttle Kurgan in a church) *Holy* ground, Highlander! Remember what Ramirez taught you.

Ramirez: The Kurgan. He is the strongest of all the immortals. He's the *perfect* warrior. If he wins the Prize, mortal man would suffer an eternity of darkness.

Connor MacLeod: How do you fight such a savage?

Ramirez: With heart, faith and steel. In the end there can be only one.

- Connor MacLeod (played by Christopher Lambert) is sought out by fellow immortal - deep breath - Juan Sanchez Villa-Lobos Ramirez (Sean Connery) as he is the chosen one deemed capable of slaying The Kurgen. Immortals sense each other's presence in a Forcey kind of arrangement so that explains how they locate one another when spread all over the globe with no internet to connect them.

- Once trained in the art of sword-fighting by mentor Ramirez, Connor is expected to attend 'The Gathering' where the last of the surviving immortals lock horns to secure 'The Prize'. What is it with all these definite articles? Shouldn't it be "There can be only *The* One"? The Amiga/Atari ST magazine of the same name would have loved that at the time.

- The Prize isn't a Kinder Egg or gift vouchers, but boundless knowledge of the universe and all its assorted inhabitants. In the right hands this can be wielded as a humanitarian tool, bringing fellow humans together in harmony. Other approaches are of course an inevitability.

- While Connor plots The Kurgan's downfall he must blend in with his present time community so as not to arouse suspicion. Should he slip up, Connor risks being rumbled, cast out of society, branded as the devil's work. Much as he was by his own clan back in 16th century bonny Scotland when he was just a wee nipper. We'll have none of your kind here, we're a *local* tribe for *local* people!

It all sounds great on *paper*, so how did Highlander descend into such a drudging mess on *screen*? I think the most significant factor is the leading role played by Christophe Lambert. Highlander needed a recognisable action star with real muscle to make the absurd believable. Many have suggested Arnie over the years. Whatever he lacked in thespian credentials he would have offset with his sheer screen presence and magnetic crowd-pulling potential.

Make Highlander larger than life and it's easier to distance ourselves from reality and embrace the nonsense. I desperately *wanted* to get lost in the seductive legend unravelled through inventive MTV style editing.

Instead, we were lumbered with a largely unknown French actor who could barely speak English playing a Scottish native. He was actually fed his lines phonetically to ensure the intonation sounded vaguely natural, yet Lambert still gives the impression that he has no clue what it is he's saying most of the time.

This is comically addressed in the script itself when Connor is arrested; Garfield, the homophobic cop mocks his idiosyncratic accent, querying where he's from. Connor retorts "lots of different places" in his indefinable brogue, while the cop reverts back to slinging the kind of derogatory slurs favoured by troglodytes. It's actually a really shrewd way of making light of the elephant in the room, building the thorny issue into the plot. If you'd lived for centuries and travelled around a lot your accent *would* sound a bit alien.

Those involved in the production must have been acutely aware that the critics would hone in on Christophe's

incongruent accent so headed them off at the gate. It *does* of course beg the question, why set yourself up for a fall in the first place? Is the gag so hilarious that it's worth the compromise?

Amongst the roster of alternative candidates considered for the role were Marc Singer, Scott Glenn, Kurt Russell, Michael Douglas, Richard Gere, Patrick Swayze , Michael Nouri, Richard Norton, Peter Weller, Ron Perlman, Hulk Hogan, Liam Neeson, Gary Oldman, Viggo Mortensen, Val Kilmer, Bill Paxton, Michael Biehn, Stephen Lang, Michael Keaton, Jeff Goldblum, Christopher Reeve, Kevin Costner, Sting, Mickey Rourke, Ed Harris, Sam Shepard, David Keith, and Mel Gibson.

…and breathe!

So what did Christophe have that no-one else could possibly bring to the role? He's not remotely charismatic, especially adept with a sword, well built or funny, yet he was fast-tracked to the front of the queue, sidelining a parade of talented nominees/applicants.

It makes no sense, sabotaging the movie. Possibly as a result of Lambert's shortcomings Highlander clocked in as the 98th highest-grossing entry in 1986, limping past the finish line with ticket sales amounting to $5.9m. To put it in context, in pole position was Top Gun ($176.8m), followed by Crocodile Dundee ($174.8m) and Platoon ($138.5m). Thanks Box Office Mojo.

Given that the accent issue doesn't solely concern Lambert suggests to me that the producers ran with it to introduce some much-needed light relief. It would be close to a desolated comedy wasteland had it not been for a certain former MI6 agent taking on the mantle.

Famous *Scot*, Sean Connery (born in Fountainbridge, Edinburgh FYI), plays a flamboyant Egyptian attempting a Spanish accent while being tutored on the constitution of the local delicacy, haggis, by a *Frenchman*. Now that's comedy gold! You'd *hope* it was all deliberate.

(after Connor has called Ramirez a 'haggis')

Ramirez: Haggis? What is haggis?

Connor MacLeod: Sheep's stomach, stuffed with meat and barley.

Ramirez: And what do you do with it?

Connor MacLeod: You eat it.

Ramirez: How revolting!

Apparently Sean spent two months in Spain with a vocal coach fine-tuning his Spanish accent in preparation for the role (in the original draft Connery was to play a Spaniard born in 1100).

Time entirely wasted since he sounds as Scottish as ever! Has he ever convincingly pulled off an accent other than Scottish? That's not what we love him for. Again, it makes no sense. He's in Scotland surrounded by authentic Scots. Why not just make his character Scottish and call him Hamish or Angus? Surely this had to be some sort of elaborate joke?

Sean was paid $1m for his minor role, finished shooting within a week and even literally phoned in some of his lines from an echoey bathroom in a Spanish villa. They were later inserted into the movie employing the ADR technique. He was worth every penny regardless - Sean is the main reason Highlander is still watchable in spite of its flaws. It's now

achieved cult status, easily recouping any financial losses endured at the time of release. Even people who have never seen the movie are familiar with the iconic tagline, "Thunder... Thunder... Thundercats... Hooooooo!!!!". I'm sure that's the one. Someone will let me know.

Accents aside, the calibre of acting falls short, particularly where Lambert is concerned. Prior to Highlander he was only really recognised for his performance as Tarzan in 'Greystoke: The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes (1984). Not a role that demands too much theatrical range.

I'm going to have to check out his more recent work. Lambert must have improved over the years along with his grasp of English. I wonder if 1995 is too soon, the year in which he became Lord Rayden in Mortal Kombat. If Lambert found himself struggling he could have asked Highlander colleague, Clancy Brown, who voiced the same character in the same year, this time in Mortal Kombat: Defenders of the Realm.

While we remember Highlander for its sword-fighting set pieces, they occupy far less screen time than the dull filler material that pads out the void between. Moreover, they aren't especially well choreographed by today's standards. Ramirez's swan song is pathetic - he takes a thump to the chest then just gives up halfway through as if his contractual time had expired at that very moment causing him to immediately down tools and slope off to the pub. Ramirez kneels, bending over to expose the back of his neck for Kurgan to gleefully raise his cumbersome broadsword and claim the Egyptian's head in slow motion. There would even have been time for one of the crew to nip out to B&Q to fetch a bucket to catch his noggin. Talk about waiting for the Hammer to Fall! I suspect the intention was to portray

Ramirez gracefully bowing out to allow Connor to step up to the plate to finish the job later as if the sequence of events had been preordained by a vague sense of cosmic order. If it was, in fact, Ramirez's decision to die it fails to factor in some extremely nasty consequences for Heather.

Luckily the finale on top of the Silvercup Studios building is more dramatic and marginally believable, in defiance of Christophe's myopia. Further enhanced by consummate pyrotechnics and practical special effects, mostly of the type that didn't require augmentation from easy CGI gimmickry.
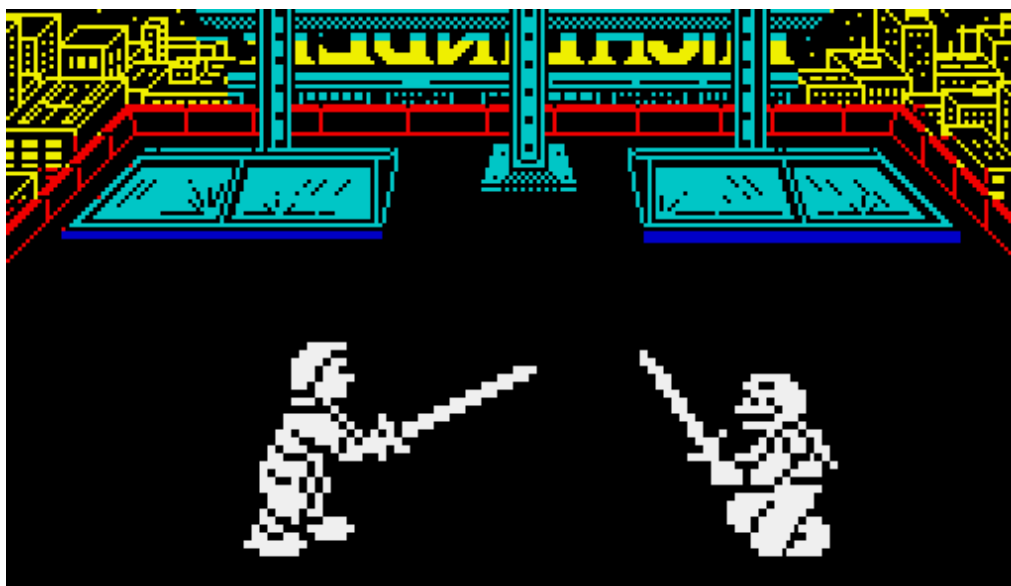
When the actor's swords clash, emitting skin-blistering sparks it's not because they were added in post-production. Cables attached to polar opposite car battery terminals were invisibly fed up their sleeves to charge the swords, resulting in an electrical arc whenever a connection was made. Even while Kurgan and Connor are duelling through foot-high pools of water. You know, the kind that don't mix so well with electricity. Now that's dedication! Imagine getting an insurer to agree to that policy today. All thoroughly passe today sadly. I've created similar special effects myself in a video editor with minimal effort and a cash injection of zero. Back then, however, this kind of wizardry wasn't so easy or cheap to execute and we were blown away wondering how it was accomplished.

Clancy is the movie's other high watermark. As cliched as it is to say he "chews the scenery", I've visited the set and seen

the bites he left. ;) Kurgan is an imposing hulk, possesses no respect for life, has no moral compass, and is utterly credible playing the part of the nemesis without a cause. Whereas Connor chooses to use his gift to absorb knowledge and evolve as a human being, Kurgan only lives to revel in the joy of anarchy and the misery of others. He's an unapologetic hedonist, it's all Gimme, Gimme, Gimme the Prize! He's equally demonic in the last act pitted against the only worthy contender to his crown.

Kurgan: (to everyone in the church) I have something to say! It's better to burn out than to fade away! - an improvised line rather awkwardly also found in songs by Neil Diamond (Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black) and Def Leppard (Rock of Ages).

Then, in the wake of a breathlessly visceral high-impact clash of the titans, any goodwill cached is blown to smithereens by the sight of clearly visible high-wire stunt cables, allowing Connor to levitate for his final spectacle of Quickening ecstasy. It was hoped that the electricity effects would serve to obscure these, and they likely *do* if you're watching the movie on VHS. Blu-ray? No chance! Although, backtracking a wee bit, we'd already seen Kurgan's bald wig coming apart at

the seams by this stage so perhaps there was no suspension of disbelief illusion left to shatter.

More effective are the animated overlays that materialise following Kurgan's demise. These were intended to represent "Demonic souls of the past, and all of the immortals who have gone before him." It's as if someone has accidentally pulled the plug on the Ghostbusters' ecto-containment system and it's sprung a leak!

Director Russell Mulcahy was previously better known for his work on music videos, which likely explains all the novel, frenetic scene/time transitions. As a tale spanning four centuries, it's necessary to flip back and forth between the ages to reveal the progression of Connor's journey. With no explanation as to how or why this is happening, it's easy to feel a bit disoriented and confused. At least upon that initial viewing.

People still to this day believe that Highlander is a movie about time travel! It's definitely not, it's a linear story told through flashbacks to multiple periods throughout history, though mostly rugged 16th century Scotland and 20th century Noo Yoik. More specifically we flit back and forth between 1536, 1541, late sixteenth century, 1783, the 1940s, and 1985. All without the aid of a Delorean.

> Ramirez: (narrating) From the dawn of time we came; moving silently down through the centuries, living many secret lives, struggling to reach the time of the Gathering; when the few who remain will battle to the last. No one has ever known we were among you... until now.

That's actually not true because Connor *had* revealed his superhero identify in advance of 1985. To the girl he saves during WWII for instance, the one who goes on to work as

Connor's assistant in the antique shop. A scene that was cut from the US release for no apparent reason.

> Rachel: Will you listen to me for one moment? You can't hide your feelings from me! I've known you too long.
>
> Connor MacLeod: What feelings?
>
> Rachel: How about loneliness?
>
> Connor MacLeod: I'm not lonely. I've got everything I need right here.
>
> Rachel: Oh no you don't. You refuse to let anyone love you.
>
> Connor MacLeod: Love is for poets.

Connor doesn't age because he, well, just doesn't. Immortals age normally until they die for the first time. Then the process ceases entirely once revived. Even wizened Yoda-esque mentor Ramirez doesn't know why immortals exist, and don't age, neatly shirking all responsibility to explain it for the audience's sake.

> Connor MacLeod: Tell me how'd it happen for God's sake.
>
> Ramirez: Why does the sun come up? Or are the stars just pinholes in the curtain of night, who knows? What I do know is that because you were born different, men will fear you... try to drive you away like the people of your village.
>
> (MacLeod turns his back)
>
> Ramirez: You must learn to conceal your special gift and harness it until the time of The Gathering.

In any case, it's certainly not the nuance of Highlander mythology or romantic segueways for which people remember the film. Rather the high-stakes carnage and decapitation scenes that decide the fate of humanity. Naturally then, they're the parts Canvas Software chose to adapt for the home-micro market. What transpired is a pure beat 'em up swashbuckling affair with little narrative structure to tie the skirmishes together.
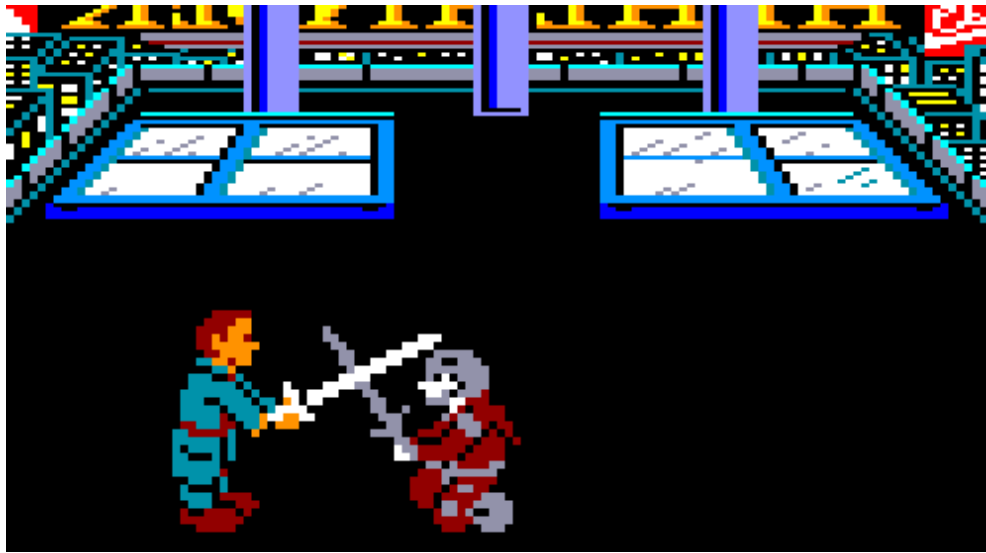
Zzap! (30%, C64 version, February 1987)

"Battle through time, develop the skills of swordplay and learn from Ramirez, your first opponent, the arts of defence and attack, timing and position. When you have defeated him move in time to the present and encounter Fizir, an ancient and more skilful opponent in modern-day New York. Here you must hone your skills and sharpen your reactions for upon his demise you reach the final battle with the mighty Kurgen. High above the city streets on a deserted rooftop the last act of this deadly quest is fought. A dual which can only be won by the supreme exponent."

Fall into the trap of letting the manual sway your judgement and Highlander the game seems like a promising proposition what with its extensive range of context-sensitive defensive and attack manoeuvres. In reality, we'd be lucky to pull off any of them when we actually intend to, instead resorting to

the default button-mashing technique that defined early brawlers.

> "Highlander is one of those games that I just couldn't get into. The game is well presented in that it gives you very good instructions, with various moves even being illustrated, but unfortunately, it lacks the playability to suit.
>
> The graphics, although being colourful, are rather jerky in places and the characters doing battle seem to be injured before they start - they walk with a limp. The movements are slow to implement and I found that if too many moves are tried in quick succession not a lot happens.
>
> Overall it's just another combat game and one that I'm sorry to say I wouldn't readily return to."
>
> **Amtix! (55%, Amstrad version, February 1987)**

There are three levels of escalating difficulty on offer, which can each be loaded individually, nixing any real sense of progression. As we switch between them, the backgrounds and opponent's names cycle, otherwise they're indistinguishable carbon-copy filler material.

"Energy is the key to the game - when it runs out you're dead! It is expended when you receive a blow or when you are unsuccessful in attack - so you win by a combination of skilful attacking and prudent defence.

As you learn the different attack sequences you will develop the strategy which enables both objectives to be achieved. The energy is recharged at a constant rate but recovery is slower than depletion so keep a watchful eye on the level and if it reaches the red band back off quickly and defend until your strength builds up for another attack."

If you study the manual then play the game you'd think they were totally disparate entities because the complexity presented in the former in no way seems to have been implemented in the latter. Maybe this is the difference between what was drafted and what actually came to pass as discussed by Simon Butler in his audio essay on the topic (see The British IBM's YouTube channel).

Strategy advice pours out of every orifice of the manual. Anyone would think it was Mortal Kombat 17 being analysed...

"Identify the different sounds made by your sword and your opponents landing a successful attack and contrast these with the sound of a defence. This is best achieved in demo-mode and will be a great help to skilful play.

Mix your attacks and defences; using the same sequence each time allows your opponent to pick a winning response (this is especially true in playing against the computer). The cut-down blow to the head can prove devastating and win the duel outright but successfully defended can knock you down and be equally damaging to the attacker so try to achieve the element of surprise.
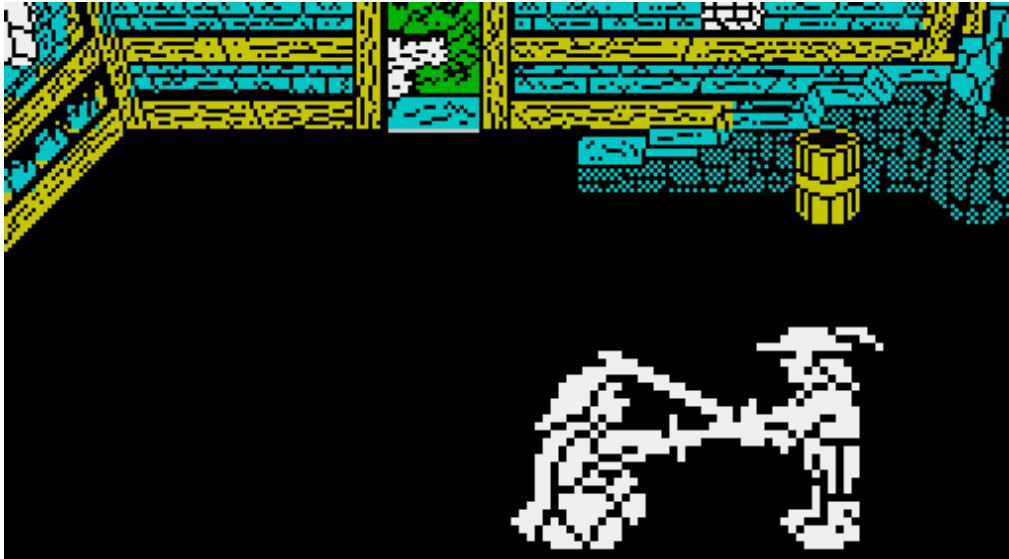

Always fight away from the edges of the playfield for as you become pinned down against the sides it is impossible to execute some of the strokes and of course backing off for a 'breather' is out!

To achieve maximum effectiveness the range of different strokes must be judged precisely, the 'lunge' against the 'cut' is a trade-off between effect and risk, skill in making accurate assessment being vital to success.

There are three main stages in the game, where skills acquired in completion are necessary to have any chance with the next opponent. Each stage is loaded in memory separately (see important note) but the increasing difficulty has been chosen to enhance your ability at each level.

The strategy required to complete each stage is different, even if you have become expert by defeating Ramirez and Fizir the mighty Kurgen cannot be beaten by strength alone, strategy must be employed to turn his power against himself. Swordplay is a balance of risk and reward, a co-ordination of the senses of sound and vision, to triumph you must be brave... and careful!
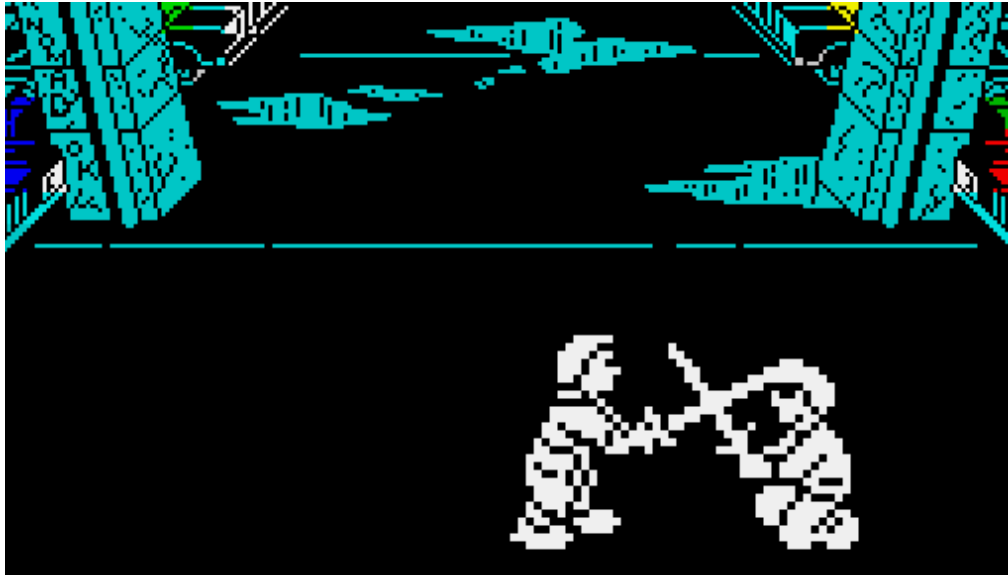
Your status and that of your opponent are energy bars at the bottom of the screen. Each bar is divided into three segments.

Green - Plenty of energy, attack at will. Yellow - Some vitality has been lost. Proceed with caution. Red - Reserves dangerously low. Take a breather or run away to battle again later."

If you're wondering why it is that we get to fight Ramirez when he's our mentor and bestest buddy (despite only knowing each other for five minutes), it *does* actually make perfect sense according to the story's doctrine. "There can be only one!" If Connor and Ramirez are the last two remaining

immortals on earth they must fight one another to the death, pushing aside any nepotism.

Ramirez's katana passes the Gillette test. No refund for you, sir.

Actually Ramirez tells us this is the case, simultaneously cluing in Connor who asks the same obvious question. It's a black cloud that hangs between the Princes of the Universe, yet like death - *exactly* like death - is an inevitability that's pushed aside until it no longer *can* be.

We know why Connor must defeat *evil* immortal, Kurgan - he'll keep slogging away, eliminating the good guys until he loses his head or becomes the last man standing, therefore the new self-appointed despot. What if two *benevolent* immortals are the only ones left? Why would they bother expending any energy on slaughtering each other? Surely they'd just agree to work together on doing the right thing for the sake of humanity? They *both* survive and the

universe is chaperoned by *two* guardian angels rather than one.

This assumed obligation to fight until only one immortal remains is as mystifying as any of the other tenets of a life led as one of the ever-living. No sensible answer is forthcoming, so the question is swept under the rug alongside the origins of the Gift, Quickening and Gathering, and precisely how they work. Sorry, *The* Gift, *The* Quickening, and *The* Gathering. Bordering on holy edicts, these phenomena need to be shown some respect.

You could write a book on the subject of everything that's *not* explained. It looks like I already *am* doing. It's the Gremlins scenario all over again... the rules with more holes than a colander, immortals guillotined in the canon fashion who inexplicably return from the dead (refer to the five sequels), contradictory evidence for and against theories that ultimately amount to pixie dust lost in a light wind.

What's spelt out for the audience and what's not possibly fluctuates depending on which edit you watch, the US

theatrical release suffering from the most severe slashes.

There are so many alternative cuts and subsequent director's revisions it's dizzying to try and keep up with what's included in each. I found a list of variations, but it didn't mention cutting any of the key expositional scenes that provide the Cliff Notes to life as an immortal. So why do so many people claim that these things are never elucidated? Did they doze off, forget they saw them or... what?

All I know for certain is that in the 30th-anniversary edition I watched recently to refresh my memory of whichever version I saw decades ago all the critical rules and regs are clearly bullet-pointed, eliminating most of the guesswork. Don't get me wrong, the hows and whys are still glossed over. It's the *whats* that are detailed so we can follow the gist of the plot. Fictional gibberish is fine as long as the *internal* logic aligns.

I can see why it would all seem a bit disjointed for anyone who was short-changed on the run-time. I've heard some people say that The Prize is simply becoming mortal with the ability to procreate. Immortals *can't* for no apparent reason, introducing a personal goal to Connor's motivational drive in case The World Is Not Enough. In contrast, the first draft script described Connor as a daddy to 37 kids! It's an important tweak since Connor is compelled to form relationships and fathom their value despite their inherent ephemeral nature. Railing against Ramirez's advice to steer clear to avoid heartbreak, the question is raised, is it better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? It's a shame that Shakespeare wasn't immortal, otherwise, we could have picked his brains. Maybe *One* Year of Love is OK? It would save us having to witness Heather's awful 'old lady' disguise!

> Ramirez: MacLeod, I was born 2,437 years ago. In that time, I've had three wives. The last was Shikiko, a

Japanese princess. Her father, Masamune, a genius, made this for me

(shows MacLeod his Samurai sword)

Ramirez: in 593 B.C. It is the only one of its kind... like his daughter. When Shikiko died, I was shattered. I would save you that pain. Please... let Heather go.

Reverting back to mortality and the ability to sire children upon accepting The Gift is definitely *part* of the deal.

Connor MacLeod: I can love and have children. Live and grow old. You never prepared me for that... you Spanish peacock.

Osmoting the consolidated wisdom of all of man and womankind is quite important too as it's considered the diplomatic device that will lead to global peace.

Ramirez: Patience, Highlander. You have done well. But it will take time. There are generations being born and dying. You're at one with all living things. Each man's thoughts and dreams are yours to know. You have power beyond imagination. Use it well my friend. Don't lose your head.
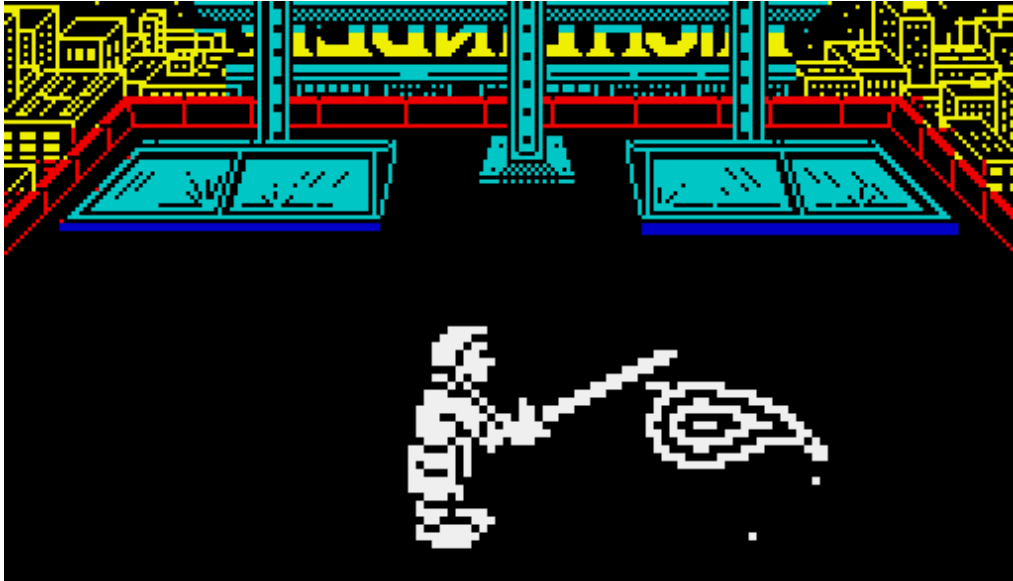
Guessing games extend to the fundamental nature of The Quickening because supposedly that's not pinned down either. Again, in the remaster I watched this was chiselled out in stone and erected in the Natural History Museum for posterity. Maybe the 30th-anniversary edition was designed to set the record straight in response to viewer feedback? I'm prepared to keep an open mind on what was originally left on the cutting room floor.

Regardless of who told who what and when, kill an immortal and their sundry lifetimes of accumulated knowledge and expertise are transferred to the assassin, making the new bearer all the more prepared to tackle the final melee.

Brenda: What can you tell me about a seven-foot lunatic hacking away with a broadsword at one o'clock in the morning, New York City, 1985?

Connor MacLeod: ...Not much.
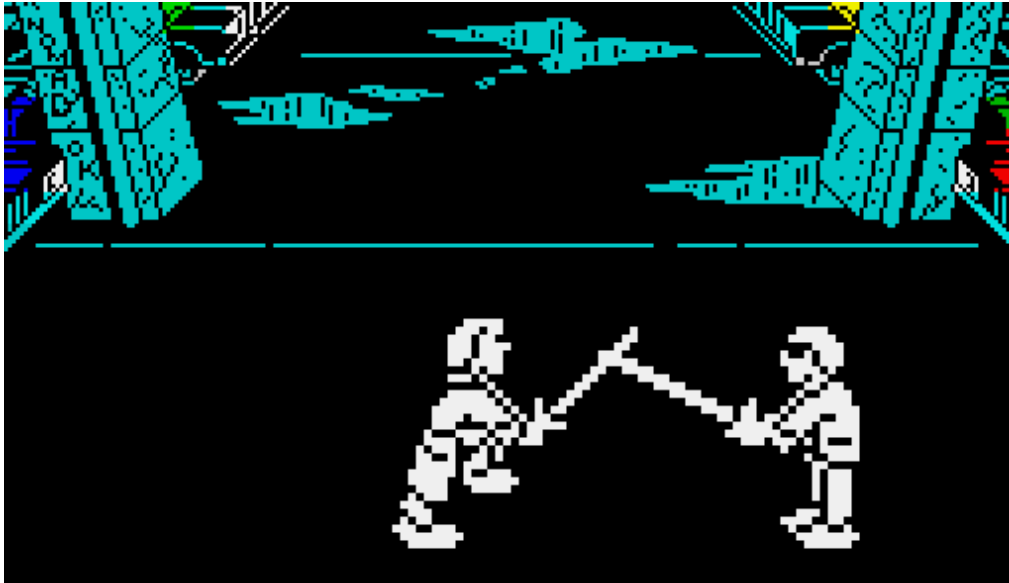
In-game we also encounter the back-flipping immortal, Fasil, who accosts Connor in a deserted car park very early in the movie. That is, prior to establishing why present-day New Yorkers are running around waving ancient katanas at each other. Why did the police not stop to consider calling a psychiatrist? I suppose this *is* the city they named twice. Why should anything that goes on within it make any more sense?

(Looking at the body lying next to its head)

Garfield: What do you think the cause of death was, Lieutenant?

In Canvas' interpretation, Fasil is instead referred to as 'Fizir', much to Highlander aficionados' amusement. You see, there's an assumption that the developers were too stupid and clueless to get that basic detail right. It's not that much of a stretch given the quality of the game, in general, to be honest.
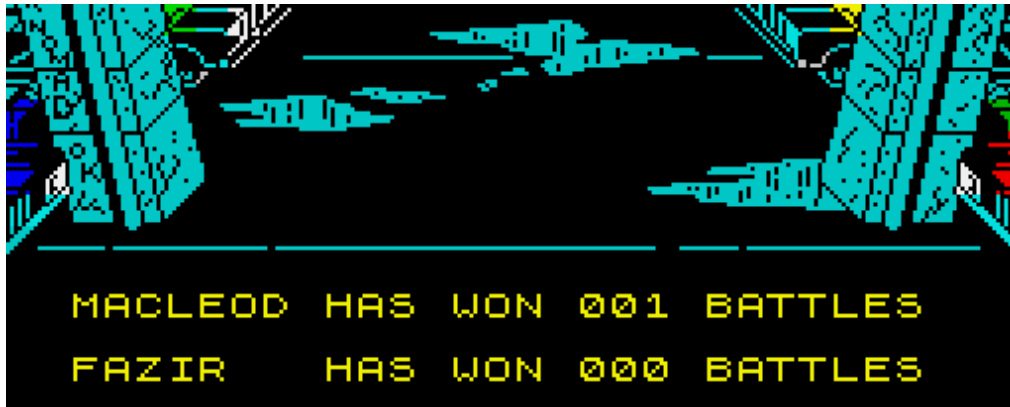
Well, at least it's spelt 'Fizir' in the manual. I wish I'd stop contradicting me.

What seems to have happened here is that they took their cue from the movie - Lambert definitely pronounces it as Fizir so it's spelt phonetically to match. Canvas likely didn't see the name written down since he's a minor character who lives and dies in the space of a few minutes. Organising the game release to coincide with the movie won't have helped because reference material would be thin on the ground with the script in a state of flux. 'Ramirez' is similarly mangled in the Commodore 64 edition, while it's spelt correctly in the Spectrum and Amstrad version, adding little weight to my theory. Hmm...

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MACLEOD HAS WON 000 BATTLES
RAMIREZ HAS WON 001 BATTLES
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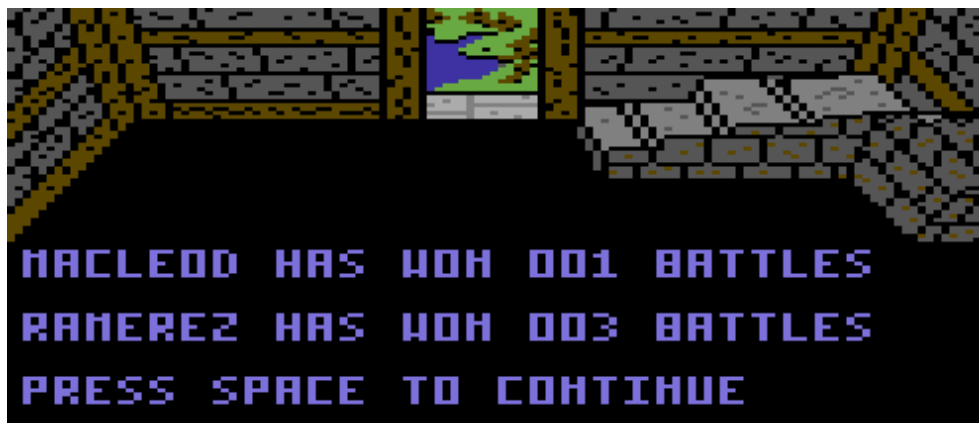
Whatever, that's the least of the game's problems. A lack of any kind of motivation to play Highlander is far more crucial. Two minutes of randomly hacking away at the joystick with no apparent translation to events happening on screen should be enough to deter anyone from playing more than once. Ironically the tutorial-ish rolling demo mode is counter-intuitive in that we can never be sure if we're actually taking part or viewing! It's *that* responsive.

Predetermined weird key combinations for both players don't help (and why does the box cover say 'joystick only'?). They're so cramped and non-standard you're forced to play the keyboard equivalent of Twister. It's a relief that the game isn't remotely addictive otherwise we'd all be suffering from arthritis overnight. Remember when critics used to award an addictivity rating before the outcry that determined this isn't something to aspire to?

> "The control of your player and the development of sword-playing skill is crucial to the enjoyment of the game. It is worthwhile watching the demo mode and then practising the moves against Ramirez (stage 1) in order to put together attack sequences and defence strategies. The instructions may seem complicated at first but it will soon be apparent that the sophistication of movement gives animation of the highest order and provides stimulating and exciting play."
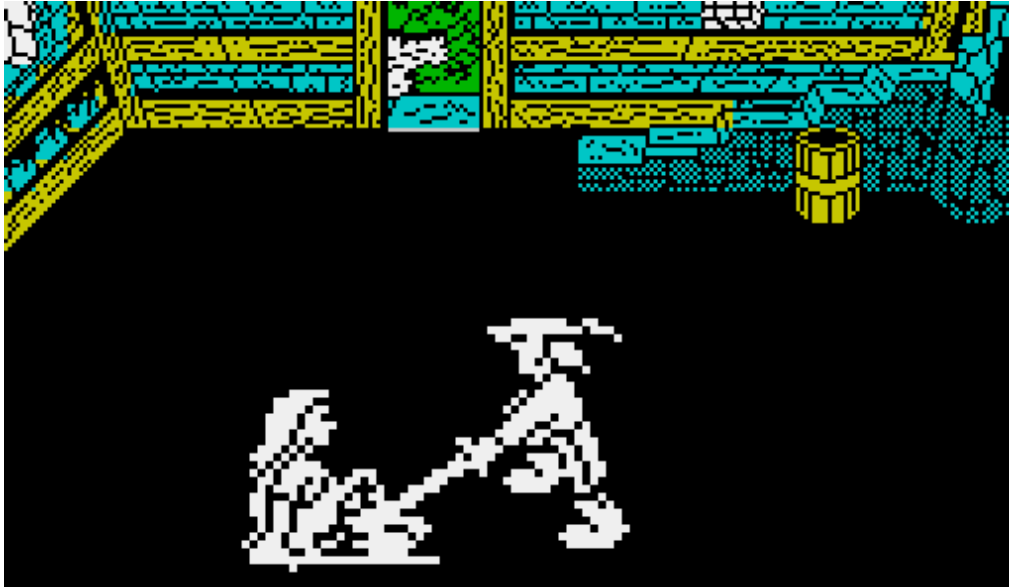
Martin Galway's synthy SID chip rendition of 'It's a Kind of Magic' is the only saving grace, worth a few quid alone if you could buy it as a single. It's still not available to buy as a complete collection in case you're wondering. Queen's Highlander soundtrack that is. This was composed specifically for the movie, Queen offering their assistance because they were so enamoured with the pre-release copy they were sent and desperately wanted to be involved.

That's more than can be said for the in-game sprites. They hobble about as though they've imbibed copious volumes of mead and only showed up on set because they were contractually obliged to pose for the graphics artists.

"A disappointing game that bears little relevance to the film."

Crash! (57%, Spectrum version, February 1987)

Well, the manual at least has a go at forging a connection...

"There can be only one Victor in this timeless battle.
Become a master swordsman or perish as your foes grow
more skilful and you finally encounter the mighty Kurgen
in this contest for immortality."

As a demo, it's almost hypnotic watching the cute, blocky immortals hack chunks out of each other. They're not badly drawn or animated given the 8-bit technology and era. I quite like the title/'hoorah' screen too, in spite of Simon Butler's dismissal of them as embarrassingly primitive. Had Ocean repackaged Highlander as a one quid demo scene production it might have sold many more copies than it did.

"We all knew what we were doing was crap... but we had no say whatsoever in the quality of the games... Ian and Roy made sure the games were done as fast as possible so they could get the cash and move speedily onto the next one.

In all good conscience I couldn't tolerate it after a while and regardless of the salary I quit. I then found myself recruited by Mr Bracey and cannot thank him enough... I have no idea what I would have done if he hadn't phoned me.

Roy went on to embezzle just about every penny that he could from Canvas and his supposed partner and friend Ian. He then stole a job in America that was meant for Steve Ward and split. Mainly because the word reached him that my last paycheck hadn't arrived and I was headed to the Wirral to kick him ten stone lighter. Or so I

heard. But I did get to slap Ian around for an hour or so which filled an otherwise empty afternoon.

Ian floundered for a while but once a seemingly endless line of repo men started turning up at the office and shame of shames at his snooker club in Southport to demand the keys to his car... he threw in the towel, rented a motor, drove to Huddersfield to go with his father to see the home side play and the same evening drove up onto the Yorkshire moors and gassed himself.

Thanks Roy you useless sack of sh*t!

Ian was flawed but he was worth ten of you."

Simon Butler, comments posted to the Ocean reunion forum on 5th February 2005

Yet another outsourced rush-job licensed tie-in then, aimed at people who didn't read reviews, buying games solely on the strength of the pretty pictures on the box and affection for the source material.

We require no more elaborate an explanation for its deficits than that. There's no need to concoct fairy tales concerning Highlander being designed from the ground up to fail so as to avoid paying Cannon Films excessive royalty fees. Although it *is* easy to see how people might have arrived at that conclusion reading between the lines of Roy Gibson's persuasive comments on the general topic. Co-founder of Canvas Software and Highlander programmer in case you're wondering. Is it possible that the rumours all stem from a quote published in Zzap! 64 in March 1987?

> "License deals annoy me. We lose directly in proportion to the size of the license. If you're on a royalties deal publishers screw you substantially. What they say is 'we've got a brilliant license and are guaranteed 100,000 sales, therefore we'll pay you less royalties because you don't need them.' You ask for a lump sum and they say they haven't got enough money left over because the license cost so much, so their priorities are 'pay for the license, then worry about the programming' - so how can the game be any good?"

Evidence for and against this equating to deliberate sabotage is as thin on the ground as Highlander's pretence to being a playable game. If Roy was indeed referring to Highlander when making these claims we'd need to know the basis of Canvas' royalty deal to assess their validity. Sometimes developers are simply paid a fixed percentage per unit sold, resulting in a more lucrative return on their investment should the game be well received and the positive response translate into greater sales.

Other royalty contracts payout on a sliding scale depending on sales volume. So developers could, for example, earn 13% per unit up to the first 100,000 copies sold, at which point the rate reduces to 10% per unit. Break the next barrier - say

200,000 copies - and the rate of return may drop further to 8%. Profitability operates on the pivot of diminishing returns, yet still grows in line with a game's chart success. On this footing it's irrational to decide from the outset that a game will only be designed to a limited standard because once its quality eclipses the scope of the deal the time spent is counter-productive, punishing even.

One way we could make sense of the idea that producing brilliant licensed games is discouraged by publishers is to only consider those rare cases where a developer might agree to a steeply sliding return on investment with no safety net. One where the royalty percentage begins at a fixed peak and is only adjusted *downwards* as sales volume increases. Then you could argue that it might be in your interests if a game doesn't receive any plaudits and enters the charts at a more modest position. Even so, sell a million units at a lower rate of return and there's a good chance the financial rewards would be preferable to selling 20,000 units at the highest possible capped rate.

It's impossible to guess which if any of these options Canvas agreed to. All we can really say is that they'd be imprudent to shoot themselves in the foot by commencing an illogical contract that was always doomed to fail. Did they begin programming the game on the proviso that they'd hash out the contractual small print later and the deal turned sour once locked in? Anything is possible given that the games industry often flew by the seat of its pants, making it up as it went along. It *had* to where there were no precedents to consult. Had Canvas felt backed into a corner with no way to win they might have decided to give up halfway through the project and deliver whatever was ready, thereby cutting their losses and giving Ocean a black eye in the process. Again, all conjecture.

What Roy seems to be alluding to is that profit margin hinged on the levity of the license awarded. Agree to adapt a more significant licensed product and the offer on the table from the outset is less lucrative than it might be for bargain-basement IP. Counter-intuitive as it sounds, there may have been some truth to the model. If the initial investment is more substantial for the publisher, everyone has to tighten their belts because expenses trickle down the chain. Gary Bracey only managed to secure RoboCop for peanuts because it was still in the pre-production phase when he pounced, and no-one realised what a massive hit it would turn out to be. Such deals were few and far between; you couldn't hope to extrapolate a licensed game budgeting theory solely from this example. A year on from Highlander's release, Roy certainly wouldn't have done so.

Whatever the source material, the same rule generally applies; it doesn't make much sense to artificially undermine sales. Sell more copies of the latest blockbuster movie accompaniment and everyone wins, just not to the extent that the developers and publishers would like in an ideal world. It's unlikely that a sane publisher would penalise a developer for optimising their chances of success - they're the ones taking the greater risk by gambling upon the popularity of the licensed product and can't afford to screw up. Not *repeatedly* anyway.

Running with the blade theme, Occam's Razor likely applies; the simplest theory is usually the correct one. Odds are that Highlander is woefully broken because so little time was allocated to designing and producing it. Good things come to those who wait and Highlander the game is what happens when you're up against ridiculously tight deadlines and no-one is keeping tabs on quality control. If this is all that was on offer there should really have been only *none*.